

Alternatives to Classroom Debate

Teachers often turn to debate to engage students in lively discussion on controversial topics; however, the results rarely live up to the teacher's expectations.

One of the main problems is that debate requires speaking from a position of certainty, and most selected topics require a mindset of curiosity, an appreciation of nuance, and a willingness to understand alternative perspectives.

In this webinar, we will:

- identify limitations of the traditional debate format
- consider alternatives teachers can use to cultivate the 21st-century skills their students need to discuss challenging topics



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Stephanie Owens Upadhyay



Stephanie is a life-long learner and educator, with over 15 years of experience in the TESOL field. She began her career as a Fulbright English Teaching Assistant in Chile and has taught students and trained teachers in Turkey, India, Ukraine, North Africa, and the United States. She has created nationwide teacher training programs, led curriculum development projects, provided one-on-one coaching for teachers and program directors, and facilitated workshops for teachers and leaders.

Originally from Connecticut, Stephanie holds a CELTA and a master's degree in TESOL from Adelphi University.



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Alternatives to Classroom Debate



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In this session, we will...



...identify the *intended* objectives of a debate



...analyze an example of a debate that did not work



...share & refine 3 activities that cultivate the 21st Century skills often missed in debates



Formal Debate

- A controversial topic such as “Should capital punishment be legal?” or “Should mobile phones be prohibited in schools?”
- Two opposing teams
- A formal structure of opening, arguments, rebuttals, and closing
- One winner

Reflection Question



What skills are we trying to develop when we use debates in class?



We use debates so students will be able to:

- Build fluency
- Use opinion language
- Read closely
- Listen closely
- Collaborate with classmates

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Analysis Question



Look at the classroom scenario.

What is ineffective about this debate set up?

Scenario

Class Information:

- A remote conversation class
- High intermediate level
- 25 students
- Students are 15-18 years old

Teacher's Instructions:

- Today we're doing a debate. I'll put you into 4 groups and you'll research online.
- The topic is "Should men and women be treated equally in the workplace?"
- "Group 1 and 2, you are PRO"
- "Group 3 and 4, you are CON"
- "You can get started now in groups."



What is ineffective about this debate set up?

Outcomes

- Students searched the internet for about 20 minutes
- Some students expressed frustration, saying things like, “I can’t defend something I don’t believe.”
- Most “arguments” were generalized or stereotypical, such as, “Women have big feelings, so they can’t work in some places.”
- Only 1-2 students spoke more than 1-2 sentences.



Common Drawbacks of Debates

- Students don't have enough world experience to have an informed opinion
- Doing debates well requires a LOT of scaffolding that many teachers don't have time for
- Most popular debate topics do NOT have a simple solution
- Debates encourage students to “win” rather than collaborate on finding a solution or a way forward
- Debates encourage students to dismiss those with different perspectives, rather than listen and incorporate their feedback

21st Century Skills

Critical Thinking & Creativity

- Finding solutions to problems
- Thinking outside the box

Communication & Collaboration

- Talking to others
- Working with others to create something

Flexibility

- Changing a course of action
- Changing your mind based on new information

Social Skills

- Being aware of others' perspectives
- Understanding your own biases



Which 21st Century skills AREN'T effectively developed by debates?

Critical Thinking & Creativity

- Finding solutions to problems
- Thinking outside the box

Communication & Collaboration

- Talking to others
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Flexibility

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Deciding between debates and alternative activities

Formal Debates

- Students have analyzed sample debates
- Students have access to high-quality sources
- Reading and research is a focus
- Formal language is a focus
- Students have time to prepare

Alternatives

- Fluency is a focus
- You want to encourage creativity, questioning, and problem-solving
- Students are developing everyday conversational skills
- You want to provide a lot of Student Talk Time without a lot of prep time

In this session, we will...



...identify the *intended* objectives of a debate



...analyze an example of a debate that did not work



...share & refine 3 activities that cultivate the 21st Century skills often missed in debates

Activities

1. Discussion Brackets
2. Scenarios
3. See-Think-Wonder



Discussion Brackets



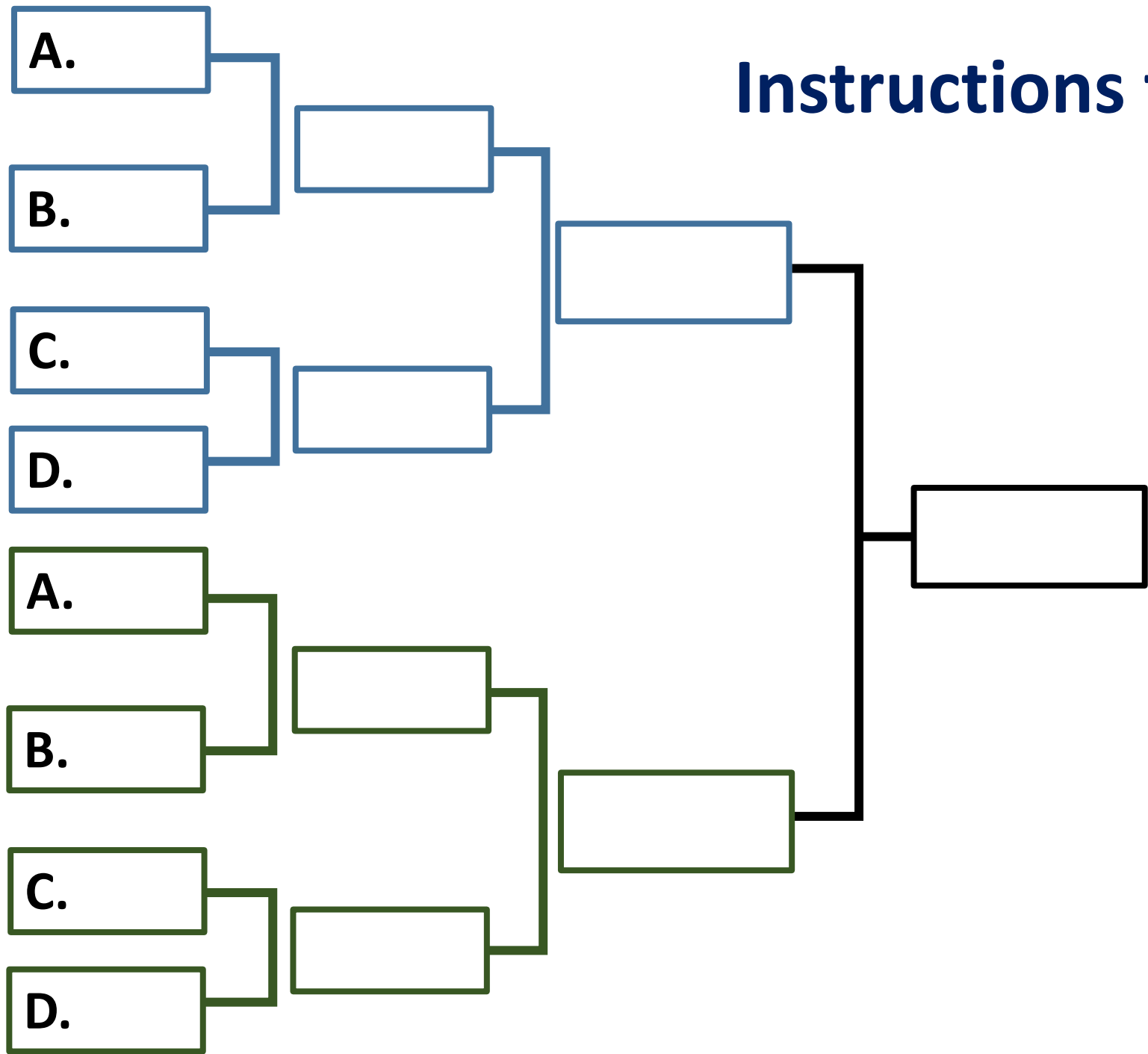
Instructions for Teachers

1. Teacher chooses a topic – it should be familiar to students and low stakes.

Topic Ideas:

breakfast foods
indoor activities
school subjects
places to visit
fictional characters

Instructions for Teachers



2. Draw a bracket on the board with 8 starting spaces.

3. Label brackets A, B, C, D and repeat.

A. bowling

B. playing board games

C. playing cards

D. watching TV

A. baking

B. drawing

C. reading

D. dancing

Instructions for Teachers

4. Brainstorm a list of **Indoor Activities** with students.
5. Fill in the first 8 spaces of the bracket.
6. Clarify any unfamiliar words
7. Divide the students into groups of 4. Each student should be A, B, C, D.

What is the best indoor activity?

A. bowling



B. playing board games

C. playing cards



D. watching TV

- Students A and B take 30-60 seconds to prepare.
- Student A has up to 1 minute to speak.
- Student B has up to 1 minute to speak.
- Students C and D listen and vote on the topic that gets to advance. (If there is a tie, the whole group can discuss and reach an agreement)

What is the best indoor activity?

A. bowling

B. playing board games

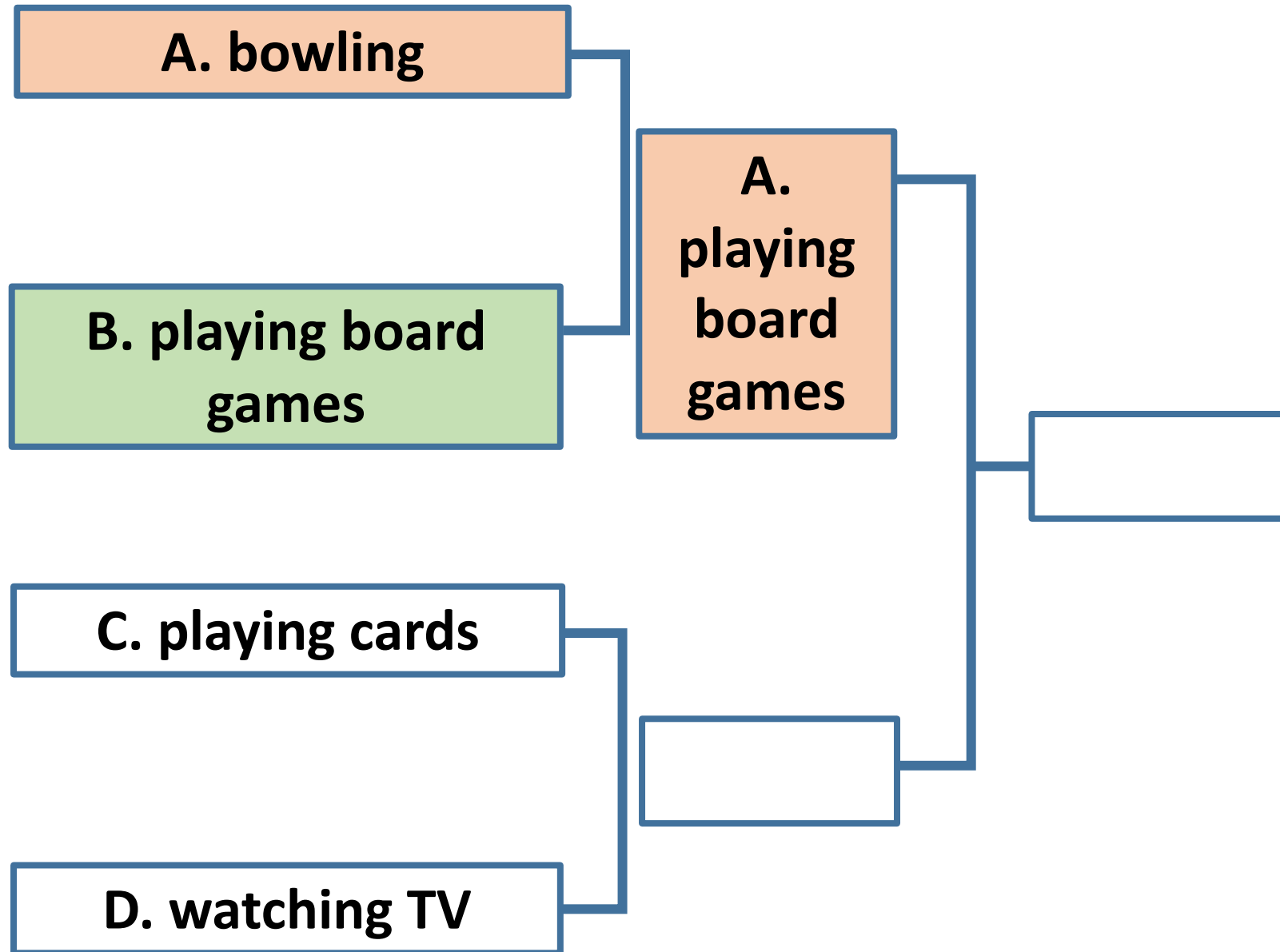


C. playing cards

D. watching TV

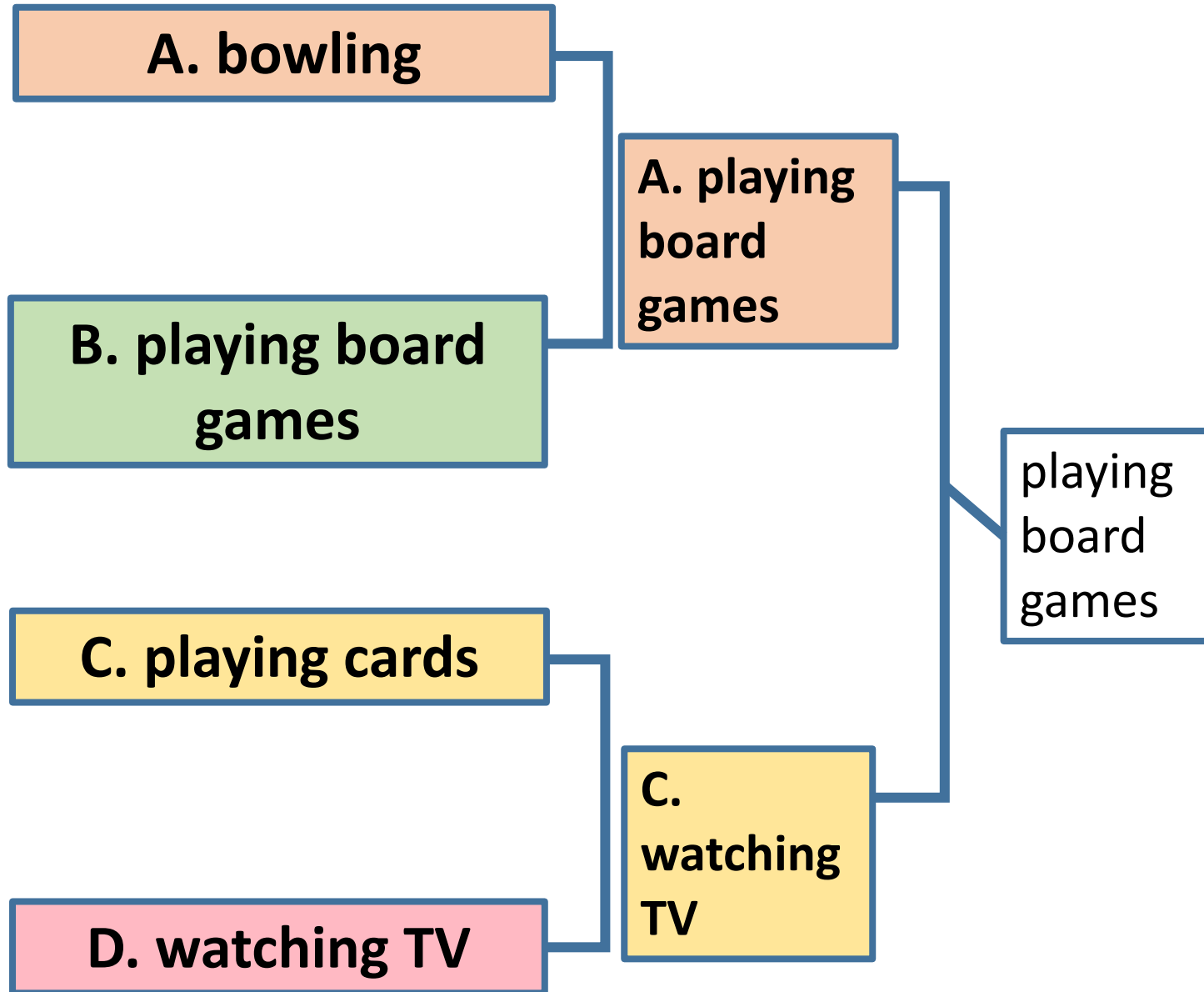
- Audience participants, you are students C and D.
- Listen to me and Kate. Which topic should advance?

Instructions for Students



- The **topic** advances.
- The person whose topic DIDN'T advance will speak again. Kate speaks for playing board games.
- Stephanie can help her plan.

Instructions for Students



- Continue playing until a topic wins.

Closure

Ask the class to reflect and share.

- Which topic won in your group?
- What was a surprising point?
- What changed your mind about a topic?

Deepen the thinking with Point-of-View variables

bowling

playing board games

playing cards

watching TV

POV

- A grandmother and grandchild
- 3 siblings
- Someone who just got home from a long day of work

How to Add POV Variables

- Brainstorm a list of 5-8 POVs with the class OR have it already prepared if you're short on time
- Write the list on the board
- Options for assigning a POV to each bracket:
 - Groups create a small deck of cards to draw from by copying the list onto scrap papers
 - Students roll dice to pick a number from the list on the board
 - Students C and D can choose one for Students A and B, and vice versa
 - Teacher can announce a POV before each bracket is discussed

Application Question



***Which topics/questions
would work best with
your students?***

Application Question



How would you scaffold this for students?



____ is a better indoor activity.

First of all, _____.

Also, _____.

Finally, _____.

Support Students with Scaffolding

- Provide sentence stems
- Practice as a whole class before putting students into groups.
- Pre-teach useful vocabulary or grammar (adjectives, comparatives, etc.)



Which 21st Century Skills did this activity develop?

Critical Thinking & Creativity

- Finding solutions to problems
- Thinking outside the box



Communication & Collaboration

- Talking *and listening* to others
- Working with others to create something



Flexibility

- Changing a course of action
- Changing your mind based on new information



Social Skills

- Being aware of others' perspectives
- Understanding your own biases



Activities

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Scenario

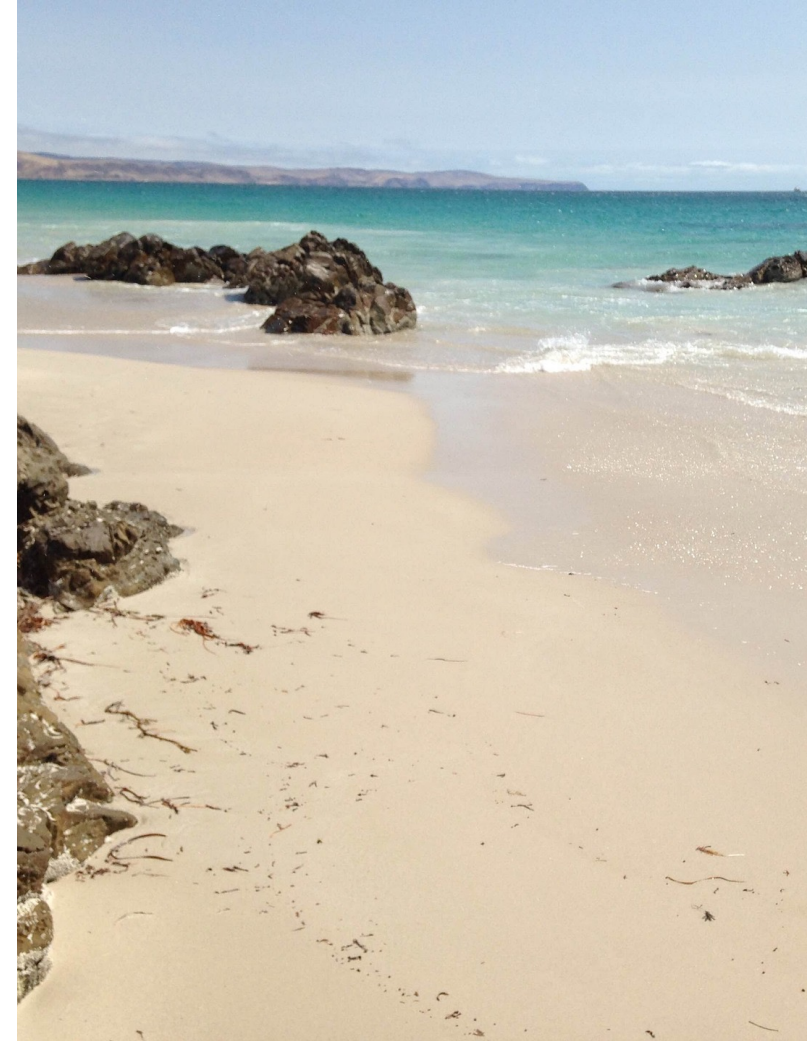


Instructions for students (and participants)

- Write down 3 of your strengths.
- Consider these sentence stems:
 - *I'm good at ____-ing*
 - *I can ____*
 - *When things are difficult I ____*
 - *Others say I'm good at ____-ing*
 - *I really like to ____*



Follow this scenario



Instructions for Students

1. Share the strengths you wrote down with your group.

Kate's Strengths

- I can carry heavy things.
- I'm good at climbing.
- I really like to go camping.

Stephanie's Strengths

- I am a strong swimmer.
- Others tell me that I'm good at staying calm under pressure.
- I'm good at making friendship bracelets.

Instructions for Students

2. You can each choose ONE tool or supply that you have with you.
You can each create ONE resource that is available on the island.

Tools/Supplies

a backpack ★ a lighter
a compass
★ wood from the boat
rope
a fishing pole

Resources

★ fresh water
★ coconut trees
wild animals
fallen branches
tall grass

Instructions for Students

3. Decide how your unique skills can help you either
 - leave the island and reach a populated place 30 miles (about 50 km) away
 - stay on the island and live a good life.

By the end of your discussion, you need to present **THREE** possible solutions to the class.

How can we reach safety?

Kate's Strengths

- I can carry heavy things.
- I'm good at climbing.
- I really like to go camping.

Stephanie's Strengths

- I am a strong swimmer.
- Others tell me that I'm good at staying calm under pressure.
- I'm good at making friendship bracelets.

Our Supplies & Resources

- a lighter
- wood from the boat
- freshwater
- coconut trees

Outcomes

- Solution 1

Kate: climb trees to get coconuts and leaves; collect the wood from the ship.

Stephanie: tie the leaves into a rope and use it to make a raft from the wood.

We can fill coconuts with freshwater for the trip. If the raft doesn't float in the right direction, Stephanie can swim and pull it.

- Solution 2

Kate can build us a place to sleep since she likes camping.

We will collect wood and old leaves and build a huge fire.

People on the island will see the smoke and come get us.

While we wait, Stephanie can keep us calm.

- Solution 3

How can we reach safety?



Solution 3:

What solution(s) have you thought of?
Feel free to add your own strengths!

Kate's Strengths

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Which 21st Century Skills did this activity develop?

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Communication & Collaboration

- Talking *and listening* to others ✓
- Working with others to create something ✓

Flexibility

- Changing a course of action
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Social Skills

- Being aware of others' perspectives ✓
- Understanding your own biases and strengths ✓

Activities

1. Discussion Brackets
2. Scenarios
- 3. See-Think-Wonder**



Student (and participant) Instructions

You will see a picture and
answer 3 questions.

Student (and participant) Instructions

1. What do you see?

Remember: Focus on facts and concrete observations.

I see a man and a woman.

They are sitting in fancy chairs.

Her toe is on something small.



Student (and participant) Instructions

2. What do you think?

What guesses or theories do you have?

I think it's a wedding.

Maybe they are getting married.

Maybe red is a traditional wedding color.



Student (and participant) Instructions

3. What do you wonder?

*What questions do you have?
What do you want to know more
about?*

Who are they?

Where are they?



Closure Technique

Add another question:

4. How could you find out?

- Encourage students to choose 1-3 questions they wondered about and report back at the beginning of the next class.

Application Question



Where could you find pictures for this activity?

Sourcing Pictures

- Have students find and bring pictures – from media or from their own lives
- Use textbook pictures, especially at the beginning of a unit
- Find magazine covers or articles, especially *National Geographic* or similar travel publications
- Voice of America Learning English: “[The Day in Photos](#)”



Which 21st Century Skills did this activity develop?

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- Thinking outside the box



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Social Skills

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Which activity would you like to try in your classroom?

Activities

- 1. Discussion Brackets**
- 2. Scenarios**
- 3. See-Think-Wonder**





Reflection Question

In what way(s) has your thinking about debates changed?



References

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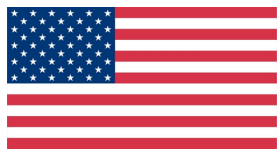
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Reflection Questions

1. Have your opinions about debates in the classroom changed as a result of the webinar? How? How might you adjust the support and guidelines you offer when conducting more traditional debates in class?
2. Which activity we learned about during the webinar was your favorite? Why? What adjustments might you need to make to make this activity successful with your students?
3. Where could you find interesting images for the See-Think-Wonder activity? Could students contribute their own images to share? Might students learn to lead this activity with an image that is meaningful to them?



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